

Scott Walsh, MEd, is a deaf education and training specialist for the Resource Materials and Technology Center for the Deaf/Hard of Hearing, a project of the Florida Department of Education, Bureau of Exceptional Education and Student Services funded through the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. The center provides statewide coordination for the delivery of specialized technology and instructional materials to deaf and hard of hearing students as well as training and technical assistance to educators and their families. Walsh, who has a severe bilateral hearing loss and attended mainstream educational programs, is a passionate advocate for deaf and hard of hearing students and works with stakeholders to create inclusive academic environments in which they can thrive. He welcomes questions and comments about this article at scott.walsh@rmtcdhh.org.

Fostering Language-Rich Environments to Enhance Educational Outcomes for Deaf and Hard of Hearing Students:

A Personal Perspective

By Scott Walsh

The use of “deaf or hard of hearing” throughout this article refers to all individuals with any hearing variability, including those who are d/Deafblind, d/Deaf with disabilities, or Deaf plus, regardless of communication modality. Also, once you have worked with one deaf or hard of hearing student, you have done exactly that—you’ve worked with one. Each of these students is unique, as are their needs and the way they access their academic and linguistic environments.

Senses, specifically sight and hearing, are the mechanisms through which we access and navigate our everyday lives, and use of language is the cornerstone of how we connect. For students who are deaf or hard of hearing, barriers to access and inability to effectively use language within an environment can have significant impacts.

How do we break that barrier? How do we ensure deaf and hard of hearing children participate in language-rich environments and, through these linguistic passageways, the cultures that surround them? How do we ensure deaf and hard of hearing children have full and continuous access? How do we increase literacy? How do we create opportunities for direct communication with peers and adults across all learning environments? The answer: It depends.

Just as no two fingerprints are alike, no two students are alike. Each deaf or hard of hearing student has their unique way of interacting with their peers, parents, teachers, and the world. From how they express themselves to how they receive the expression of others, from how they experience and advocate for their rights to how they interact with each

*Photos on pgs. 9 and 11 (center) and illustration courtesy of Scott Walsh
Additional photos by Matthew Vita, Laurent Clerc National Deaf Education Center*



Left: When you have someone in your corner who pushes you, challenges you, and inspires you to grow—someone who sees beyond any obstacles and recognizes the incredible potential within you—nothing can stand in your way. Carmelina Hollingsworth, my project director for RMTCD-DHH, has been that person for me.

other and their hearing friends, each student approaches each situation differently. A plethora of factors make a difference, of course, as hearing levels, communication modalities, and communication vary among students. Further these differences occur not just among students but even with the same student as that student goes about their day. Accessibility fluctuates constantly—environments change, communication partners change, and topics change. While it may be easy to navigate one environment or topic, a change in the setting, conversation, or communication partner can drastically impact a student's ability to receive, understand, and appropriately respond.

As educators, we often separate language learning into two domains: Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) and Cognitive Academic

Learning Proficiency (CALP). BICS refers to everyday language that we use with each other. CALP is more complex language often used in academic settings. BICS serves students socially; CALP serves students academically. In traditional acquisition, a child develops BICS first and then develops CALP. This makes sense in that language usually develops first in the home, where everyday communication involves the child, parents, and siblings. Children have the capacity to learn any language (Marschark et al., 2006) as long as they have access. The brain doesn't care about modality, it just craves language (Kovelman et al., 2008). Since language learning progresses in both American Sign Language and English at the same rate, perhaps we can assume that BICS and CALP are synonymous in this progression as well.

While each deaf or hard of hearing student is unique, the single most important consideration for all deaf and hard of hearing students is **access**. Throughout their lives, access is key. Our students need access to the language-rich environments that surround them, especially at an early age. During the first years of life, the brain is constantly building new neurological pathways and strengthening existing pathways. Access determines whether these years are a catalyst to creating a solid foundation of language or a barrier for the rest of the child's life.

As educators we want to ensure students are immersed in a language-rich environment throughout the school day. This must start the moment students arrive in the classroom—or in the building's entrance way—and continue with every single interaction that occurs.



Above: Students need access to the language-rich environments that surround them, especially from an early age, whether at home, at school, or in the community.

Interactions with students, both academic and social, are moments that allow students to build new language, practice familiar language, and scaffold the language that they know with their knowledge and experience to synthesize more complex language.

Looking at your students through the perspective of using interactions to build language rather than through the lens of teaching designated subjects shifts the mindset—and the effects can be monumental. The first year I started as a new teacher at the Colorado School for the Deaf and the Blind, I had a mentor

teacher who met with me throughout the week. She advised me to teach in the moment—and in every moment. If a lesson took a turn from the intended path due to group discussion, she encouraged me to roll with it. These moments are hard to recreate, but when students are engaged, opportunities are rich with possibilities; teachers can teach, build, and scaffold new language as it unfolds in conversation.

However, language is more than a communication tool. Language leads to literacy, and literacy leads to meaningful engagement with the world, including directly to employment. Missing even a single part in the “language to literacy equation” can have detrimental effects on the success rates of students. Many factors contribute to a child’s successful literacy development—family

involvement, amplification, and the willingness of family members to learn and implement a new language. Still, “the single greatest risk faced by deaf [children] is inadequate exposure to a usable first language” (Gulati, 2023).

The most extreme result of lack of access is language deprivation. Language deprivation, or chronic lack of full access to language during the critical period of language acquisition, is completely preventable. In selecting what educators call a “communication mode,” parents should have one objective: picking a language that is fully accessible, both receptively and expressively. Instead of entertaining the never-ending debate of determining which language is “correct” or “the best,” instead of turning to the audiologist’s recommendation or settling for whatever language the school may offer, parents should focus on their child and use the language that is most accessible for that child.

Children are different, linguistic environments are fluid, and the complexity of navigating these environments may result in the student choosing to use one form of communication in a given environment and a different form of communication in another. It is the student who must code switch and navigate between two languages, and it is the student who should be free to decide what is the most accessible communication at any given time. As educators, we need to be prepared for this and encourage the student to advocate for their preferred communication modality in



Language infused throughout ALL aspects of the student's day
Rich accessible, & robust communication
Environments barrier free, developed intentionally for d/Deaf and hard of hearing students

each setting.

Accessibility of language takes place on multiple levels and affects everything in the academic environment.

Accessibility of language should be the prime determinant as parents and teachers face the question: *Where will students find themselves experiencing a language-rich environment?* An alternative to an all deaf classroom may be providing specially designed instruction through services to ensure a language-rich environment in all settings every day, wherever the student travels throughout their

Above: Walsh catches up with his former student, Jackson Swartzlander, who he taught while working as a teacher of the deaf in the public school system. **Below:** When teachers have high expectations of their students and believe they can succeed, then those students believe it, too!

Language is all around us, but if a person cannot access it, it holds no value.



academic journey.

In addition to recognizing that each deaf or hard of hearing student is different and ensuring they have access to language, professionals must set the academic bar high. They must also recognize that hearing loss is only a piece of their students' identity; students come from different cultures, and they have different passions and skills. Deaf and hard of hearing students can do anything their hearing peers can do except hear, and they need to know this. They need to know that they are smart, they are capable, and their hearing level does not define or limit what they are capable of achieving. However, the foundation to all of this, and the foundation of their success, will depend on their acquisition of language.

Language, whether auditory or visual, is a shared need of everyone. It should be established based on the needs of the

student, not on what's easily available for the school or the preferred modality of others. So, what can you, as an educator, do? Cultivate accessible language with your students during every possible moment. Be their fiercest advocate and let them know that they matter. And, above all else, believe in them; hold your expectations of them so high that they have no other option than to meet them. I am grateful for every one of the people in my life that believed in me, challenged me, and pushed me to become someone I never thought I would have an opportunity to become.

All deaf and hard of hearing children are different, but the accessibility to rich language that surrounds all of us is critical for everyone. Language is all around us, but if a person cannot access it, it holds no value.

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